DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 359 581 CS 508 226

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TITLE Homework and Network: Applications for Communication Theory.
PUB DATE 15 Apr 93
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Joint Meeting of the Southern States Communication Association and the Central States Communication Association (Lexington, KY, April 14-18, 1993).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Students; *Communication (Thought Transfer); Communication Skills; Criticism; Higher Education; Interpersonal Communication; Learning Activities; Persuasive Discourse; *Student Writing Models; Theories; *Writing Assignments
IDENTIFIERS Northern Kentucky University

ABSTRACT

An assignment that has proven successful in teaching "Communication Theories" (a senior-level capstone course at Northern Kentucky University) is "The Application Folder." The goal of the assignment is for students to apply concepts from the course in their everyday life. Students monitor and analyze what they watch, read, and hear, looking for opportunities to use course concepts to interpret the world. For each entry in the folder, students provide a copy or account of the item/event and an analysis of the item in terms of text and/or lecture concepts. Students are expected to pursue the project all term long. Grading is based on quantity, quality, and presentation. (Three examples designed by the instructor and offered to students with the assignment, and five sample student entries related to the issue of rhetorical sensitivity and based on newspaper cartoons are attached.) (RS)

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Homework and Network:

Applications for Communication Theory

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Presented at the joint meeting of the
Central States Communication Association and the
Southern States Communication Association
April 15, 1993

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Russell Proctor

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC).

The attached pages are a description of "The Application Folder," an assignment that has proven quite successful in teaching Communication Theories (our department's senior-level capstone course). Its success can be measured by the many students who, though they have completed the course, continue to drop by my office with newspaper and magazine clippings that illustrate communication theories. One former student made my day when she said the following--with a smile--while handing me a clipping: "You've ruined me. I can't read the newspaper or watch TV any more without thinking of Communication Theories and that darn Application Folder!" Her comment reflects the ultimate goal of this or any course--that students would see the world differently as a result of what they have learned.

The three pages that follow are a copy of the assignment I give my students on the first day of class (including three examples I designed). Attached next are five examples of actual student entries from last semester. All five discuss cartoons related to the issue of rhetorical sensitivity (any spelling or grammar errors are theirs--I left the originals intact for the sake of evidential accuracy).

For those who might read this paper without attending the panel, the word "Network" in the title refers to a brief presentation I will make about using the classic (and prophetic) 1976 film in my Theories class. The movie is an excellent resource for those who address mass communication theories in their courses (particularly the notion of media creating social reality). Those interested in learning more about using Network are encouraged to contact me for further information.

APPLICATION FOLDER

The goal of this assignment is for you to apply concepts from Communication Theories in your everyday life. I want you to monitor and analyze what you watch, read, and hear, looking for opportunities to use course concepts to interpret your world. You will then keep a record of each application you make in an ever-expanding folder.

For each Application Folder entry, you need to (a) provide a copy or account of the item/event you are analyzing, then (b) offer your analysis in terms of text and/or lecture concepts. A one-paragraph analysis should be sufficient, unless you have more you want to say.

Feel free to analyze newspaper/magazine articles, cartoons, advertisements, textbooks from other courses, television shows, movies, personal conversations--the list of potential sources is endless. As a guideline, however, the preceding list is roughly in order of importance; in other words, I'm more impressed with print media entries than personal conversation entries (because they suggest you are well-read and they provide documentation).

I want this to be a project you pursue all term long rather than something you throw together the weekend before it is due. I expect to see entries from early and late in the semester, as well as theories from Trenholm and DeFleur (and corresponding lectures). To make sure you're on track, you may submit a sampling of entries to me any time between the first and second exam. I will offer feedback to let you know how you're doing. Although this is not mandatory, the best folders I received last semester were submitted for midterm feedback (hint, hint).

Your final Application Folder grade will be based on quantity, quality, and presentation; that is, how many applications you provide, how insightful they are, and how professionally you present them. Regarding presentation, entries must be typed, spelled correctly, and neatly displayed. Failure to do so will result in a lowered grade. This is a semester-long project and your only out-of-class assignment; therefore, I expect it to be your best senior-level work.

Attached are examples of Application Folder entries. When the item you analyze is in print (as in Examples 2 and 3), please provide a copy (attached, pasted, or photocopied). In addition, please underline or highlight key phrases in the item. Although I put two entries on one page for the sake of space, in your case please put each application on a separate page.

This folder is due at the beginning of class on:

EXAMPLE 1

On the television show Law and Order (Jan. 7, 1992), a young man pled not guilty to murder charges by reason of insanity. A psychiatrist on the witness stand was asked if she believed the defendent knew the difference between right and wrong when he committed the crime. She responded, "No one can get inside his head and determine what he knows or doesn't know. All I can do is judge his behavior, and his behavior in other situations suggests to me that he knows right from wrong."

The psychiatrist's emphasis on behavioral patterns rather than "black box" mental states suggests a behaviorist rather than a psychoanalytic approach (DeFleur, p. 39). This also aligns with Fisher's pragmatic (rather than psychological) perspective of communication (Trenholm, Chap. 3, and Cronkhite, pp. 241-42).

EXAMPLE 2

The interaction in this cartoon can be explained using CMM. (Trenholm, Chap. 5). Although "NOTHING" could be interpreted literally on the content level, at the speech act level the intention--and therefore the meaning--is quite different. Even the child in the cartoon knows that in this episode of "Marital Squabble," under the contract of "Husband and Wife," with the life scripts of "Insensitive Male" and "Misunderstood Female," within the cultural patterns of contemporary America, the word "NOTHING" constitutes "GUESS" (particularly if he reads her nonverbals). The Regulative Rule in this interaction suggests that he had better start guessing.

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Cutting TV violence historically difficult

BY BARRY GARRON
The Kansas City Star

Give U.S. Sen. Paul Simon credit for high ideals and a bad memory.

Simon wants to make TV less violent, a noble ambition. People have wanted to make television less violent almost from the time TV was invented.

"We imitate what we see on television and the movies," the senator said.

In an unusual move, ABC, NBC and CBS announced recently they have adopted guidelines to "limit the depiction of violence" in programs starting this fall. Simon, who two years ago got Congress to pass an antitrust exemption that allowed the networks to work together on the matter, announced the guidelines at a news conference.

Whether they will make a difference is doubtful.

The family hour

Twenty years ago the surgeon general told Congress "that the causal relationship between televised violence and anti-social behavior is sufficient to warrant appropriate and immediate action."

In 1975, as criticism of TV violence mounted, the National Association of Broadcasters designated the first hour of prime time as a family hour. All entertainment at that time was supposed to be suited for the entire family.

That didn't please TV producers, and it didn't satisfy critics of violence.

The National Citizens Committee for Broadcasting began to measure television violence and to chart the companies that advertised on the most violent programs. This organization was joined in 1976 by the national PTA and the American Medical Association.

Hearings on TV violence were held in eight big cities in 1976 and 1977. The attention caused several large advertisers to withdraw their support for violent shows.

By fall 1977 the anti-violence campaign seemed to be having an effect. The new fall schedules were short on cop shows and long on comedies.

What actually happened, however, is that the networks found a substitute for violence — sex.

ABC introduced *Three's Company* and CBS offered *Flying High*, with three voluptuous models starring as flight attendants.

With the goal seemingly accomplished, groups that pushed for less violence decreased their activities.

Then, slowly but surely, more violent programs returned to television.

The antitrust exemption that allowed the networks to work together on guidelines was welcomed by the networks about as warmly as a writers strike.

Networks figure they already have plenty of guidelines, including their own standards regarding violence. Who needs more?

Still, they developed a new set of guidelines, figuring it was better to write your own than to work under mandatory rules imposed by the government.

Simon announced the guidelines at a news conference late last week.

"The networks have assured me you will see a difference," he said.

The question could not be put to the networks. None sent representatives to the news conference.

Matter of dollars

Simon should have figured out by now that guidelines don't matter much to television. What really counts are ratings and advertisers.

If advertisers send a message that they will not put commercials on violent shows, TV violence will dry up quickly.

If viewers tune out particularly violent programs, they will disappear from TV.

But don't hold your breath.

Like it or not, violence is an everyday part of American life.

Some of the most popular movies, such as *Lethal Weapon*, *Die Hard* and *Terminator*, are also the most violent.

What's more, the new guidelines exempt sports and newscasts, arguably the two biggest sources of violence on television. The guidelines also appear to exempt reality shows, such as *Cops* and *FBI: The Untold Stories*, which have found new ways to bring violence to millions of viewers.

Finally, the guidelines have no arbiter and no provision for enforcement.

Guidelines

The new guidelines say that, starting this fall, TV violence:

1. Should be relevant to the development of character or advancement of the plot.
2. Must not be gratuitous or excessive.
3. Should not be depicted as glamorous or as a solution to human conflict.
4. May not show excessive gore or pain.
5. Should be measured in intensity and frequency so the program, as a whole, is appropriate for home viewing.
6. Must not show how to use harmful devices or give descriptions of unique ways of inflicting pain.
7. Should show the consequences to victims and perpetrators.
8. Should be used with great care when children are victims.
9. Should be eliminated from children's programming if it would be unduly frightening.
10. Must not be mixed with sex as erotic.
11. Should involve animals only for legitimate requirements of plot development.

EXAMPLE 3

A variety of issues from DeFleur can be seen in this article. When Senator Simon argues that "We imitate what we see on television and the movies," he is agreeing with modeling theory (Chap. 8). When the surgeon general told Congress that there is a "causal relationship between televised violence and anti-social behavior," he was using correlational data to determine a causal relationship, no doubt based on content analysis (p. 218 and lecture). When the author notes that "networks found a substitute for violence--sex," "What really counts are ratings and advertisers," and "Like it or not, violence is an everyday part of American life," he subscribes to the Chap. 5 explanation of low-taste content as the stabilizing force in the American media system.

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This cartoon from Curtis perfectly exhibits the concept of rhetorical sensitivity (Trenholm, Chap. 6) which states that a rhetorically sensitive person "is truly socially competent because he or she combines a concern for self and others with a recognition of the importance of situational constraints."

With the intent of searching for a compliment or just needing reassurance, Curtis's wife asks him if it looks like she's gained weight. Being the rhetorically sensitive husband that he is, Curtis feigns sleep to avoid answering his wife's question. He analyzed his audience, and by not answering her he's fulfilling the needs sensitive to the role because he doesn't want to hurt his wife's feelings.

Curtis
I FEEL LIKE I'VE GAINED A FEW POUNDS, BUT I DON'T REALLY CARE. IF I HAVE GAINED, AND IT SHOWS, IT WOULDN'T BOTHER ME ONE BIT!
HON, DOES IT LOOK LIKE I'VE GAINED WEIGHT?
Z
I'M NOT CRAZY!

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This cartoon goes along with the Interactionist Perspective and the idea of "Who is the 'real' me?" The focus is on role-taking learned through social activity, and this man has played so many different roles, he is questioning who the "real" he is. The theories in Chapter 6 follow the Interactionist Perspective that there is no "real" or "fake" you, that we are just complex role players. Also, our roles give us our identity, so by this man taking away certain roles, he is losing some sense of his identity.

(10/30/92) This cartoon shows the interactionist perspective on the idea that we play many roles in life. Dave is saying his acts of sensitivity and vulnerability are just roles he is playing in this relationship. When his girlfriend tells him to just be himself he is probably thinking of another role he likes better (possibly a back stage role or a role he plays with his buddies at the football games). His girlfriend is suggesting that there is just one "real" Dave and he should act as such in all situations (psychological perspective).

In this cartoon Beetle is not being rhetorically sensitive and is paying the price. He did not pick his fight carefully and he chose to be the noble self in which he said what was exactly on his mind. Because he chose this course of action he must face the consequences.

THE SUNDAY COMICS THE CINCINNATI ENQUIRER NOVEMBER 15, 1992

BEETLE BAILEY

BY MORT WALKER

YOU ASKED TO SEE ME, SIR?
YES, A COMMANDER NEEDS TO GET INPUT FROM HIS MEN
I COMPLETELY AGREE WITH YOU, SIR
YOU CAN'T GOVERN FROM AN IVORY TOWER
AND YOU CAN'T HIDE BEHIND ALL THIS PAPERWORK
AND ALL THESE REGULATIONS! THEY STIFLE INDIVIDUAL INITIATIVE!
WHAT YOU NEED IS SOMEONE AT THE TOP WHO'S AN EXPERT ON THE BOTTOM
M.P.'s!
HEY! I HAVE A LOT MORE INPUT!
YOU KNOW WHERE YOU CAN PUT IT
WALKER

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This cartoon represents the socialization of children. Choices A-C would represent the choices of a child that is a "Noble Self". This child would not care about the feelings of the gift giver, but would simply state how he feels, after all that is the only way one can be true to themselves (Humanistic Psychology)! This choice of "D" would teach a child to analyze his audience and say the most appropriate thing for the situation. If there was a choice for a rhetorical reflector it might say "This is the most beautiful scarf ever, I'll wear it everyday, you are my best friend!"

Comics for Kids
SLYLOCK FOX says...
One of your birthday presents is a funny-looking scarf. Do you...
a) shriek with laughter?
b) say, "Was this on sale?"
c) pretend to puke?
d) say "thank you very much"?
11-7
WEBER

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